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Pat Gardner

Auburn University

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MY SIZE FELT SMALL

Pat Gardner

Auburn University

Emily Dickinson once complained to Higginson about people who speak too directly and “embarrass my dog.”¹ It was not her habit to embarrass her dog—or herself. The same poet who said, “The truth is such a *rare* thing that it is delightful to tell it” (*Letters*, p. 474) usually does so only within the frame of some game. Indeed Poem #1129, which begins, “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—” is actually one of her most direct. She promises to “tell all the Truth”—but does not say when; that the unveiling will be done “gradually.” Thus she gains time for all the games she may want to play first.

Emerson J. Todd discusses the “Little Girl” persona,² which is probably Dickinson’s favorite game, citing various poems as examples, some more convincing than others. A clearer example of the “Little Girl” game is found in the letters to Higginson, which themselves read like the poetry and seem to be an extension of it. Her first letter begins, “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?” Right after this child-like line a sophisticated woman says, “The Mind is so near itself—it cannot see, distinctly—and I have none to ask—.” A few lines down she is again calling him “Sir” and asking him to tell her “what is true.” She adds, “You will not betray me—” (*Letters*, p. 403), and even her customary dash here sounds like a child’s breathless pause. A few months after beginning her correspondence with him she is signing herself “Your scholar” (*Letters*, p. 412). After becoming his scholar she says, “I had no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself...” (*Letters*, p. 414). Clearly she is asking him to do so. One senses, though, that Emily Dickinson means to retain the upper hand even while asking Higginson to rule her. She is simply too elusive to be dominated. In a letter more lyrical than factual she concludes, “Is this—Sir—what you asked me to tell you” (*Letters*, p. 405)? A woman who does not even answer direct questions directly is in no real danger of being dominated. Instead, she is playing at being a child and asking him to play at ruling her.

If the letters sound like poetry, some of the poems sound like notes. So effective is Dickinson when she plays at writing a brisk little note that the reader may almost forget—momentarily—that a game is being played. But not because Dickinson means that the reader should forget. The issue of her attitude toward the games and the reader will be considered. For the moment, though, let us look at the “note writing” device. Largely it is a matter of tone. One senses that

Dickinson is the bashful-eager lady who has been sending notes to the reader for years.

Although tone contributes most to the note quality, form and content should not be overlooked. The short lines with frequent dashes resemble a note that one might write to a friend. Anyone comparing Dickinson's poems with the letters will be struck by the similarity in form and content. The dashes are present in the letters, and it is not hard to draw line by line comparisons to the poems. In one letter she says, "Your letter gave no Drunkenness because I tasted Rum before— Domingo comes but once..." (*Letters*, p. 408). The line seems reminiscent of another: "I taste a liquor never brewed" (#214).

Anyone asking why Dickinson uses this approach should postpone such questions and look at how the notes are put together. Usually, as Archibald MacLeish points out, there are no adjectives.³ Often the note seems cryptic, even detached at a glance. Typically what seems to be a mundane statement precedes the real statement of the poem. The impact is quiet and startling as the little wild flower that springs up beneath dry leaves and goes unnoticed by most people.

No matter how interesting the technique, one must come back to the question of what Dickinson is up to when she plays games. What she is not doing is trying to trick the reader. To play a game and not tell the reader that one is in progress is to refuse to play "fair." Dickinson, however, always invites the reader to play. In the letters to Higginson, as has been noted, she is inviting him to be playful and pretend to rule her. In her note-poems, the mischief is felt and the reader is invited to pretend with her that only a mundane note is being sent, while knowing full well what is going on. Furthermore, the form of a note implies mutual participation since a correspondence is a dialogue.

Even after we acknowledge that Dickinson plays "fair" with the reader, we might be tempted to assume that the games are mainly for self protection. This idea is especially pertinent to the little-girl game—if one notes how selective Dickinson is about whom she plays with. Always she chooses some strong male figure who would not harm her, such as a teacher or a minister. (Evidence in the poetry suggests, for example, that she was in love with a Presbyterian minister.) Closely intertwined with the idea of being a little girl is that of being a pupil—a bright child in a fairly safe situation. As has been noted, she signs a letter to Higginson, "Your scholar." In her second letter to him she recalls, "When a little girl, I had a friend, who taught me Immortality—but venturing too near, himself—he never returned— Soon after, my Tutor died—and for several years, my Lexicon—was my

only companion—Then I found one more—but he was not contented I be his scholar—so he left the Land” (*Letters*, p. 404). At times the one she treats in this manner is God—the nineteenth century New England God being a strong male figure. She calls him “Papa” and says, “I am poor once more” (#49)—obviously expecting to be replenished. Her idea of being a student, it should be noted, is evident even in connection with God—especially if we consider #193, in which “Christ will explain each separate anguish/ In the fair schoolroom of the sky—” There is no little irony and some anger in this poem, since she is being scalded now and the explanation will come when “I have ceased to wonder why—”

Despite this pattern of offering child-like trust only selectively, Dickinson is doing more than protecting herself. Ultimately the little-girl game serves psychological and thematic functions in the poetry. These functions become apparent when one realizes that Dickinson’s writing resembles a snapshot. In a certain slant of light it reveals a scattering of brilliant colored fragment—bits of raw emotion. In another light, though, one sees a figure at the center of the snapshot. This figure is basic to the poetry. Since everybody is, in some sense, a child in need, this figure is basic to the ability of the text to speak for both writer and reader. In this person—this metaphor—the experience of both reader and writer is expressed.

Although the little-girl game is effective, the note-writing game turns out to be essential to the poetry. The necessity of the restrained, conversational tone becomes obvious as soon as one notes the central emotional content of the poetry. Allen Tate suggests that Dickinson “thinks sensation.”⁴ Without the pretense of writing a stiff little note, Dickinson would overwhelm the reader; she would become the mad woman sending anguished letters. Not able to bear so much unrelieved passion, the reader would either pity or despise her. Or she would be pitied and despised and laughed at simultaneously—and the poetry would fail. This response would result from the reader’s own embarrassment, but the poetry would fail just the same. Dickinson is too shrewd to evoke that response. Instead she uses a dignified little note to convey passion that might otherwise “embarrass her dog”—and her reader.

NOTES

¹*The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 2: 415

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²*Emily Dickinson's Use of the Persona* (Hawthorne, N.Y., 1973).

³"The Private World," *Emily Dickinson: Three Views by Archibald MacLeish, Louise Bogan, and Richard Wilbur* (Amherst, 1960), p. 15.

⁴"New England Culture and Emily Dickinson," *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson: Selected Criticism since Eighteen-Ninety*, ed. Caesar Robert Blake and Carlton F. Wells. (Ann Arbor, 1964), p. 159.